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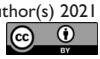

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Lara Montesinos Coleman
Department of International Relations, University of Sussex

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At the heart of *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* is a revolt against fetishism: the appeal to abstract categories, treating concepts as if they referred to things 'out there' in the world, independent of social relations). It is commonplace to note that studies of international relations routinely fetishise a system of 'sovereign' states, abstracted from history and the social relations, practices and ideologies that sustain state power. What Bieler and Morton emphasise is that even 'Left' analyses routinely make fetishistic appeal to concepts – 'the state', 'the market', 'security', 'production', 'finance', 'knowledge' – which are treated as things-in-themselves, devoid of human beings in their concrete social relations.[1] Despite some scholars' careless applications of the label 'Marxist' to such work, Bieler and Morton's critique is very much in line with Marx's own critique of a tradition of classical political economy so beholden to the modern obsession with uniformity and universality that it forcibly read history through the categories of bourgeois ideology (abstract individuals interacting in 'the market' and so on) that were made to look like '*general preconditions* of all production'.[2] For the authors of *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, these concerns take on particular urgency at a juncture marked by global economic 'crisis', the developmental 'catch-up' of emerging economies and inter-state rivalry shaped by the dynamics of global political economy.[3] The last thing we need is more fetishism, more mindless repetition of abstract categories like 'states', 'markets', 'security' and so on. All this does is naturalise the existing order and insulate it from critique. Instead, Bieler and Morton insist, we must confront the historical contingency of

Corresponding author:
Lara Montesinos Coleman, Department of International Relations, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, Arts Building C, Arts Road, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9SJ, UK.
Email: l.coleman@sussex.ac.uk

capitalism and 'be on guard against the use of fetishised concepts, categories or raw facts'.[4] This is, in other words, a 'necessarily historical materialist moment'.[5]

Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis is, in many regards, a magisterial demonstration of why, in concrete, real world terms, it matters that we attend *both* to the historically contingent nature of our categories of thought (or, in a different lexicon, the discursive constitution of the world) and to the capitalist social relations from which dominant ideas emerge and to which those ideas give form. In these brief remarks, I do not intend to focus upon the substance of their empirical analysis, but to offer some reflections upon the philosophical underpinnings of this endeavour (and, I should add, its political implications). Bieler and Morton aim to steer a path between an economistic faux-Marxism that treats ideas as epiphenomena of material structures, on the one hand, and an overemphasis on contingency, on the other.[6] Historical materialism does not reject the poststructuralist claim that objects are constituted through discourse. Where it differs, Bieler and Morton underscore, is in the assertion that this is 'material social practice (. . .) developed through means of social production and reproduction as a material relation'.[7] In other words, we cannot ignore capitalism and the material reality that some people own capital and others have to sell their labour power to survive, but this does not mean that these social relations – or the structures to which they give rise – exist as things in themselves.[8] Rather, Bieler and Morton emphasise the relational nature of ontology: all categories, they argue, are *internally related* to one another, part of a self-forming whole.[9] Class emerges from historical relations and struggle, in intimate entanglements with race, gender and our relationship to the natural world. Thus, race, gender, ecology and sexuality are internally constitutive of class, held together with class in a 'combative unity', and struggles over these forms of domination must not be subordinated to narrowly-defined 'class' struggle.[10]

I should emphasise at the start that I agree with much about Bieler and Morton's approach. I agree that it is important to locate struggles against racism, patriarchal domination and depredations against nature in relation to global capitalism, without reading them off a fixed account of economic relations. I also concur with their critique of much Foucauldian thought, in which contingency is so absolute that there can never be 'a moment of ontological fullness', that would enable us to identify the stakes of critique, or understand *why* 'a certain set of ideas (. . .) dominates at a particular time'.[11] Indeed, as Doerthe Rosenow and I have discussed, what we often find in post-structuralist thought – as well as in Foucault's work itself – is that tacit ontological assumptions slip back in (because we cannot do without them if we want to talk about political stakes).[12] In IR scholarship, this often involves – albeit entirely contrary to the intentions of Foucauldian scholars – fetishising categories of policy discourse based on decidedly liberal ontological assumptions, generating what we identify as the 'security fetish' of much poststructuralist IR.[13]

Where my disquiet begins is at the point at which Bieler and Morton specify their own ontological starting point: the underlying power structure given form by the social relations of production, characterised in terms of two classes opposing one another.[14] It is important to underscore that with their anti-essentialist view of class, Bieler and Morton recognise that racism and gender relations take on particular connotations in the context of capitalism, that the history of class formation is also a history of colonialism,

patriarchal domination and appropriation of nature, and that we need to think about 'expanded forms of class struggle' that recognise the internal relationships between class, gender, race and the natural world.[15] However, the implications of this formulation, which draws upon a well-known article by David McNally, become clear in a subsequent chapter on 'Exploitation and Resistance'.[16] For Bieler and Morton, as for McNally, gender and race are 'identities' that are inherent to class as it 'happens' within human relationships.[17] My concern is that this downplays the significance of racialisation and hetero-patriarchal domination as constitutive of capitalism, not only historically but as, in Silvia Federici's words, 'necessary conditions for the existence of capitalism of all times'.[18]

Capitalism has been extended through and alongside specific Eurocentric and anthropocentric forms of knowledge, with more fundamental implications for language and lived experience in the present than I think Bieler and Morton acknowledge. For instance, as Gurminder Bhambra and John Holmwood emphasise, the very category of 'labour' in political-economic thought rests upon a racialised moral economy through which the 'free' worker (whose labour power is commodified) is differentiated from the slave (commodified in their very being).[19] Likewise, 'to look at history from a feminist viewpoint', Federici insists, also 'means to redefine in fundamental ways the accepted historical categories' that have come to shape political economy.[20] As Rosenow underscores in her work on environmental activism, it is commonplace that critical scholars to simultaneously acknowledge that 'non-Western ways of making sense of nature have been ignored and suppressed in *political and socioeconomic practice*' and 'neglect the way that Marxist, anarchist, deconstructivist or otherwise radical Eurocentric *concepts and categories* continue to suppress alternative bodies of knowledge about the world'.[21]

This tendency is reflected in Bieler and Morton's ontological starting point and their subsequent framing of expanded class struggle. They recognise that capitalism has been coeval with the suppression of other knowledges, particularly with regard to the natural world. What they miss is that the shaping of language and lived experience through the extension of Western capitalism (in other words, what decolonial thinkers call coloniality) is as much as much an ontological phenomenon as an epistemological one.[22] Nelson Maldonado-Torres has reflected at length on how ontological thinking feeds invisibilisation and dehumanisation of racialised subjects when taken as a foundation.[23] This has important implications for how, and in the company of whom, we approach questions of capitalism, war and crisis, and how we conceptualise anticapitalist struggle. Take the question of capitalist-driven ecological crisis and how this might be approached through the suppressed knowledges of colonised peoples. For indigenous peoples of the Americas, for instance, the land is a living being, to be respected and protected. Land itself is a Mother, not a thing to be appropriated as a commodity or defended as mere property. It is, as Rolando Vázquez explains, to be defended as part of life, 'for the sake of protecting the ancestors, of preserving an origin that is both past and always, already present'.[24] The land does not exist in a linear temporality, to be subjected to forces of progress and development. In its very being 'it implies the past, heritage, memory'.[25] These are not, in other words, just distinct interpretations or discourses that attribute value to nature differently. They are *ontologically incompatible* with a modern Western relationship to nature.

The metaphor I normally use to make sense of this ontological incompatibility for Western audiences is that of wave-particle duality in physics. If we want to understand the diffraction of light into the colours of a rainbow, then we need to conceptualise photons as waves.[26] If we want to understand how a photovoltaic cell works, then we must conceptualise photons as particles. Neither conceptualisation is compatible with the other, yet neither is more correct. Rather, what the photon *is* depends upon our interaction with light in the context of an experiment, what we do with the light and by what means, our relationship with it – and with other objects (the prism, the photovoltaic material and so on).[27]

A Marxist might respond that this is missing the point: that the social relations of production provide us with an appropriate general category to underpin analysis of international relations and, as such, an appropriate ontological starting point.[28] Consider Marx's critique of the fetishisms of classical political economy, introduced above. Marx was scathing towards a modern mode of reason so 'ruled by abstractions' that it engendered a forced reading of history through categories that were themselves historical products of capitalist ideology. He was, nevertheless, insistent that this did not mean that we can only undertake descriptive analyses of specific historical phenomena (precisely the problem that Bieler and Morton correctly identify with Foucault). What was important for Marx was *how* historically particular categories were combined with general, transhistorical categories. 'Production', he considered an appropriate general category, because it identified certain common features of all societies' forms of social reproduction. There is a 'general uniformity' to production, which is to say the 'appropriation of nature by the individual within and through a definite form of society'.[29] This 'general uniformity', whatever the form of society within which production takes place, 'is due to the fact that the subject, mankind, and the object, nature, remain the same'.[30] As such, the concept of production could be brought to bear on that which was specific to capitalism.[31] Production, moreover, is always one part within a closed totality of social reproduction: 'production, distribution, exchange and consumption (. . .) are all members of one entity, different aspects of one unit' (in other words, an ontology grounded in production is one of internal relations).[32]

What if, however, the subject and object do *not* remain the same? What cannot be captured here are those other ways of being human, and the other modes of relationship with the non-human and other temporalities these imply. It is not at all clear that relationships with nature in indigenous cosmovisions can be captured by the term 'production' at all. The ontological incompatibility at play is not transhistorical but intrahistorical. Think, again, of wave-particle duality: the very being of the world is not only relational and emergent from interaction but simultaneously plural and inconsistent (wave and particle, in this case). We can accept – with Marx – the transhistorical relevance of certain categories such as production. We can also accept the relational nature of ontology: that categories are internally related to one another. But there is a danger of further obscuring other, ontologically incompatible, concepts and fields of relations by reading one, internally related, emergent constellation as a unified totality. Within Bieler and Morton's framework of internal relations, decolonial and anticapitalist indigenous struggles over land and nature can only feature as 'idioms' within the dynamics of expanded class

struggle, as part of a dialectical configuration or dynamic totality.[33] They cannot be grasped, ontologically speaking, on their own terms.

Much of the problem here is the tendency to think of history in terms of a totality, even when this is expressed in dialectal terms as 'a dynamic totality that expresses (rather than suppresses) its discrete parts'.[34] Rejecting this does not mean doing away with the idea of totality altogether, or dissolving everything into the fleeting and particular. 'Cultures outside "the West"', Anibal Quijano observed, 'routinely assume a perspective of totality in knowledge that acknowledges the irreducible, contradictory and heterogeneous nature of reality'.[35] At stake here are not just multiple perspectives on a dynamic reality (within which indigenous cosmovisions would be just discourses or idioms), but plural – and incoherent – realities that are themselves always in the making through interaction with the world.[36] This does not entail that there is 'no truth' about social and political reality (any more than the making of light into wave or particle or particle in the context of scientific experiments would imply that there is no truth about photons – we can, after all, make things with them). Nor does it mean going in the other direction, reifying other ontologies or assuming the emancipatory potential of radical alterity. It is vital, as anthropologists Lucas Bessire and David Bond insist in a critique of the so-called ontological turn in social science, not to eschew the task of grasping power and domination 'by the root' in favour of 'tend[ing] to a different plant altogether'.[37]

My own approach to engaging with dissonant ontologies is of many years of involvement with indigenous, peasant and worker movements in Colombia, where contradictory ontologies are enacted within struggles rooted in embodied experience of the violences of capitalism, war and perpetual crisis.[38] Here, Marxism, feminism and indigenous cosmovisions collide, not as idioms within one expanded class struggle or 'combined oppositional consciousness',[39] but as what Rosenow and I call 'echoing' reference points.[40] Peasant activists talk about visions for life forged from a 'convergence in space-time' with indigenous populations. Trade unionists grounded in Marxist theory, meanwhile, build relations of solidarity with indigenous movements on terms that engage reciprocally – and seek to learn from – ontological dissonance.[41] There is not space here to set out what this means for how we understand theory or philosophical foundations to analysis, except to say that it involves thinking theory through the lens of concepts and relations formed in struggle, rather than situating struggle in relation to theory.[42] It also involves an emphasis upon relationship and reciprocity, and, as Maldonado Torres puts in closing his essay 'On the Coloniality of Being', an invitation 'to think modernity/coloniality critically from different epistemic positions and according to the manifold experiences of subjects who suffer different dimensions of the coloniality of Being (. . .) to initiate a dialogue between humans and those considered subhumans – and the formulation of a decolonial and critical cosmopolitanism'.[43]

It may indeed be a 'necessarily historical materialist moment': Bieler and Morton set out compellingly why this is the case, and why it matters that we avoid the violent abstractions that naturalise the existing order. Nevertheless, while perhaps necessary, historical materialism is certainly not sufficient.

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Notes

1. Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 7–8, 13–4.
2. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, David McLellan (ed. and trans.) (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 18.
3. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, pp. 4–5.
4. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, p. 12.
5. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, p. 3.
6. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, p. 19.
7. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, p. 74.
8. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, pp. 37–8.
9. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, pp. 6–9.
10. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, pp. 131–3.
11. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, pp. 61, 75. Observations that Bieler and Morton also apply insightfully to the particular reading of Althusser underlying the *Rethinking Marxism* collective's over-emphasis upon contingency. See Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, pp. 134–41.
12. See our contribution to Leonie Ansems de Vries, Lara Montesinos Coleman, Doerthe Rosenow, Martina Tazzioli and Rolando Vázquez, 'Fracturing Politics (Or, How to Avoid the Tacit Reproduction of Modern/Colonial Ontologies in Critical Thought', *International Political Sociology*, 11(1), 2017, pp. 90–108. Foucault's problems in this regard are well-recognised in philosophy. See, *inter alia*, Beatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, Edward Pile (trans.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).
13. Lara Montesinos Coleman and Doerthe Rosenow, 'Security Studies and the Limits of Critique: Why We Should Think Through Struggle', *Critical Studies on Security*, 4(2), 2016, pp. 202–20.
14. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, pp. 37–8.
15. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, pp. 144–50.
16. Bieler and Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, p. 38; David McNally, 'The Dialectics of Unity and Difference in the Constitution of Wage-labour: On Internal Relations and Working Class Formation', *Capital and Class*, 39(1), 2015, pp. 131–46.
17. Class 'as something which in fact happens' is E. P. Thomson's famous formulation in *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), pp. 8–9.
18. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004), p. 13.
19. Cf. Gurminder K. Bhambra and John Holmwood, 'Colonialism, Post-Colonialism and the Liberal Welfare State', *New Political Economy*, 23(5), 2018, pp. 576–9.
20. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, p. 13.
21. Doerthe Rosenow, *Unmaking Environmental Activism: Beyond Modern/Colonial Binaries in the GMO Controversy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 3, original emphasis.
22. See Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', *Cultural Studies*, 21(2/3), 2007, pp. 168–78; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, 'On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept', *Cultural Studies* 21(2/3), 2007, pp. 240–70.
23. Maldonado-Torres, 'On the Coloniality of Being'.
24. Rolando Vázquez, 'Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity's Epistemic Violence', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 24(1), 2011, pp. 37–8.
25. Vázquez, 'Translation as Erasure', p. 38.
26. Lara Montesinos Coleman, 'Ethnography, Commitment and Critique: Departing from Activist

Scholarship', *International Political Sociology*, 9(2), 2015, pp. 272–3, 276–7. See also my contribution with Rosenow to Ansems de Vries et al., 'Fracturing Politics (Or, How to Avoid the Tacit Reproduction of Modern/Colonial Ontologies in Critical Thought)', *International Political Sociology*, 11(1), 2017, pp. 90–108.

27. It is worth noting that my deployment of this metaphor draws upon Gaston Bachelard's philosophy of science, which deploys and internalised dialectics—the photon, the observing subject, and the technical means of experiment are all internally related. See Montesinos Coleman, 'Ethnography, Commitment and Critique', *International Political Sociology*, 9(3), 2015, p. 276.
28. For an argument along these lines, and a critique from a different perspective, see Justin Rosenberg, *The Follies of Globalisation Theory* (London: Verso, 2000), Chapter 3.
29. Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 21.
30. Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 18–19.
31. Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 18.
32. Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 33.
33. Cf. McNally's discussion of mobilisations in Bolivia and Mexico in 'The Dialectics of Unity and Difference', p. 142. See also Jeffrey Webber, *Red October: Left-Indigenous Struggles in Modern Bolivia* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
34. McNally, 'The Dialectics of Unity and Difference', p. 142.
35. Ánibal Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', in Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (eds), *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (London: Routledge, 2010[1989]), pp. 29–31.
36. Rosenow, *Unmaking Environmental Activism*, p. 16; Mario Blaser, 'Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe', *Current Anthropology*, 54(5), 2013, pp. 551–3.
37. Lucas Bessire and David Bond, 'Ontological Anthropology and the Deferral of Critique', *American Ethnologist*, 41(3), 2014, p. 441.
38. See, *inter alia*, Coleman, 'Ethnography, Commitment and Critique'; Lara Montesinos Coleman, 'Struggles, Over Rights: Humanism, Ethical Dispossession and Resistance', *Third World Quarterly*, 36(6), 2015, pp. 1060–75; Lara Montesinos Coleman and Doerthe Rosenow, 'Struggles Over Nature: Beyond Biopolitics', in Sergei Prozorov and Simona Rentea (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Biopolitics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 260–70.
39. Cf. Webber, *Red October*; McNally, 'The Dialectics of Unity and Difference', p. 142.
40. Coleman and Rosenow in Ansems de Vries et al, 'Fracturing Politics', p. 105.
41. Many of the thoughts in this paragraph draw upon a new article upon which Rosenow and I are subsequently working, which engages in a critique of Foucault's philosophical project from this perspective.
42. Coleman and Rosenow in Ansems de Vries et al, 'Fracturing Politics', pp. 102–5.
43. Maldonado-Torres, 'On the Coloniality of Being', p. 261.

Author biography

Lara Montesinos Coleman is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Sussex.